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ABSTRACT

The Family Involvement Communication System (FICS) is intended to enhance the coordination of educational services for children as well as to encourage cooperation among schools, parents, and universities. FICS is designed to achieve these goals through focusing on the family as a cohesive unit, providing renewal strategies for school personnel and family members, implementing an open communication system, emphasizing a human and interactive approach, and encouraging parents, children, and other community members to participate in the total educational activity. The three basic components of the program are the parent advisory council, the outreach and contact program (including parent study groups, home visitation, and health services), and the university-based support system (including practicum and internship experience). (Author)

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School, Community, University Consortium: A Model of Involvement

by

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Historically, uniformity in public schools was considered a guarantee to equal educational opportunity for all. However, the attempt to adjust a uniform educational process to a pluralistic society has resulted in the opposite. Fantini (1972) states; "Alienation, loss of cultural identity, human classification (slow, deprived, disadvantaged, with self-fulfilling prophecies), absenteeism, rebellion" are often the results of uniformity in public education.

American public education, designed to educate all children, appears to be at a crisis point in the minds and attitudes of the public for several reasons:

1. There appears to be a lack of open communication between the educational system and public concerning the purposes of education.
2. There seems to be an almost total lack of communication with parents of children in regard to educational purposes as they relate to the curriculum of the school and to the known stages of child development.
3. There appears to be a total absence of public schools working in full partnership with families.
4. There seems to be a lack of recognition on the part of universities and colleges of the need for educationally related services to fit the realities of the communities they serve.
5. Finally, in rural areas, small elementary schools located in isolated communities serve as "feeder" schools for large high school districts. The further the attendance center is from the student's immediate community, the less sensitive the curriculum and instructional program is to the student's personal and/or educational needs, interests, and concerns.

Maxton and Rich (1977, p. 29) pose two questions to be answered by today's educators. These are: "how" can the mounting research on the relationship of

the home to children's school success be translated into practical action and, how can we involve the community meaningfully in the education action?"

Gordon (1972) suggests five levels of involving parents in public school: (1) audience, bystander-observer, (2) teacher of child, (3) volunteer, (4) trained worker, and (5) participants in decision-making i.e. through advisory board membership. He states that most attempts at involving parents in school programs have been at level one.

In order to coordinate educational services provided for children, as well as to encourage consultation with and the education of adults who are involved with their growth and development, a multifaced approach under the title of Family Involvement-Communication System (FICS) is proposed. The implementation of FICS attempts to make a difference in the academic, social and emotional growth of children through: 1) focusing on the family as a cohesive unit; 2) providing renewal strategies in the form of demonstrations and in-service activities for school personnel and family members; 3) implementing an open communication system congruent with the basic tenets of democracy; 4) emphasizing a human and interactive approach; and 5) involving the family (parents and children) and other community members in the educational experience to the extent that they become an integral part of the total activity. Therefore, the FICS model is at least one possible approach to answering the two questions posed by Mattox and Rich (1977). Implementation of FICS would facilitate family participation at Gordon's (1970) parental involvement levels two through five.

The FICS model assumes that through joint concern and understanding, educators, parents and other community members will cooperate and together become more responsive to the needs of children and the needs of society. By involving parents in active roles as para-professionals working with other parents, teachers and students an understanding of the educational objectives and needs would be enhanced. Parent involvement, as defined by FICS, is an

entirely new concept when compared to information dissemination which has characterized traditional parent-education programs. FICS is based upon the premise of doing "with" families as opposed to doing "for" families.

Figure 1 is an attempt to present schematically the FICS model. As can be seen by viewing Figure 1, the family, with the dual goals of communication and involvement, is at the center of FICS. The interfaced arrows of the system express openness. The three major components of the model are: (1) Parent Advisory Council (community based), (2) Outreach and Contact Program (school-community based), and (3) Support System (university based).

Professional personnel required for the implementation of FICS are: (1) a Coordinator-Ombudsman, (2) Community Health Nurse, and (3) a Counselor. Graduate students would be assigned to assist in the training of the para-professionals and in the implementation and evaluation of the FICS program.

The para-professionals trained in involvement and communication skills would have the major contribution in the actual implementation and continuation of FICS. By the end of a 12-month period of operation, the FICS professional staff would serve only in consulting and coordination capacities. The FICS trained para-professionals would assume major responsibilities in training and supervising other parents and community members in order to assure the continuation of FICS.

Parent Advisory Council

A Parent Advisory Council (PAC), composed of parents, community members and two representatives from higher education institutions would be established at the outset of the program. The PAC would meet bi-monthly and would participate in interviewing and employing staff personnel. The FICS Coordinator-Ombudsman will report directly to the PAC. The PAC would be the final voice of authority in all matters concerning the program and would be involved in the ongoing evaluation of the project.

A vital function of the PAC would be to identify needs and concerns and

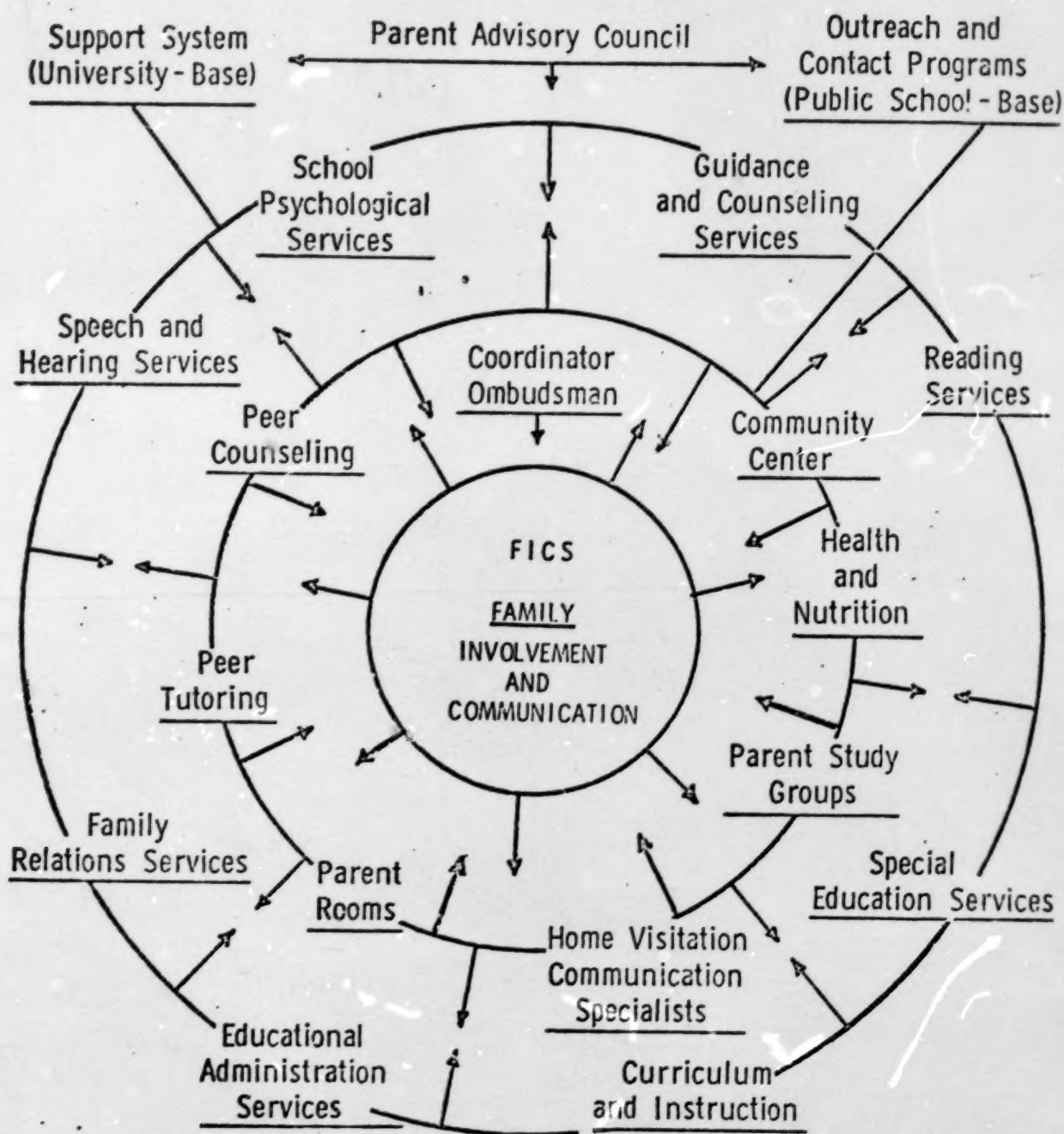


FIGURE 1 -- Family Involvement - Communication System (FICS)

to make subsequent input into the program. Hopefully, the FAC would become the nucleus for identifying and/or assuming the leadership responsibility necessary for the maintenance and continuation of FICS.

FICS Outreach and Contact Program

Coordinator-Ombudsman. This person would coordinate the activities of the FICS sub-components and related personnel and insure that these activities maintain the original focus, family involvement and communication. In addition, a major part of his/her mission would be that of an educational liaison. He/she would assist parents, upon request, in any way possible relative to the educational experience of their youngsters. He/she would be instrumental in establishing a facilitative loop for youngsters as they enter consolidated high schools from the rural independent elementary school districts.

Community Center. A Community Center would be developed to provide means for families to act together in projects of common interests to their school and community. Activities, not unlike the "pie supper" syndrome, would encourage the needed concept of the community being involved together.

Activities involving families and other community members could include projects in the following categories:

- (a) Socio-civic-economic--Establishment of materials on political and economic concerns, consumer education programs, focuses on power identification, negotiation procedures;
- (b) Home and family life--Nutrition workshops, 4-H Club activities, Scouts, cooking with commodities; and
- (c) Recreation--Arts and crafts, social events, school plays.

Parent Study Groups. The general purpose of these study groups would be to help parents understand their children and to develop more effective ways of relating with them. The discussions, therefore, would be directed toward practical applications. Parents would be trained and supervised by the FICS

Counselor to lead the study groups.

Home Visitation-Communication Specialist. The Home Visitation-Communication Specialist component is based upon the premise that behavior, rooted in attitudes and beliefs will change as a consequence of involvement and communication between parents and teachers, thus resulting in a more satisfying and productive school experience for students. Communication Specialist is the title given mothers or fathers who have taken part in FICS training.

The duties of the Communication Specialist would be: (1) Improving home-school communication through home visitations, and (2) attempting to help teachers gain an understanding of pupils. The Communication Specialist and teacher would form a team for home visitation purposes. The FICS Counselor would train and supervise the Communication Specialists.

Parent Room. The Parent Room would be a resource room operated by para-professionals and open at stated times, including evening and weekend hours. The Parent Room would have pamphlets, books, slides and film strips chosen for their pertinence to the parents and children of the school.

Employment possibilities, to the extent of earning money for school fees, are limited for many youngsters. One function of the Parent Room would be to establish an "Employment Opportunities Center" for the Junior high and high school age youngsters. Civic agencies and private citizens in the surrounding community would be asked to cooperate in this endeavor.

The FICS Counselor would assume responsibility for the training and supervision of the Parent Room Coordinators. Parent Room Coordinators would disseminate information and serve as liaison between family and school and family and community.

Health Services. Many persons living in rural communities, lack information concerning and transportation to seek available health services. Hospitals are often located long distances from the rural community. A

Community Health Nurse could be housed at the elementary school and make home visits in the community.

The FICS Community Health Nurse also would assess the health and nutritional needs of families residing in the rural areas. He/she would establish lines of communication for the purpose of disseminating pertinent public health information and would implement a Community Health Program in conjunction with teachers, para-professionals and other project staff.

Peer Counselors. The Peer Counseling component is based upon the assumption that youth are more apt to confide in other youth than adults identified with the school. Five junior high and five high school age youths would serve as Peer Counselors. Peer Counselors would receive formal training for three weeks on the higher education campus. The Peer Counselors would be supervised by the high school and elementary school counselors (if the schools have certified counselors) and/or the FICS Counselor.

Peer Tutoring. Five junior high and five high school age youths would serve as Peer Tutors. They would receive formal training for three weeks on the higher education campus. The Peer Tutors would have the same exposure to a university environment as the Peer Counselors. The Peer Tutors would be supervised by a high school or elementary school teacher and/or the FICS counselor.

FICS Support System

The Support System for the Outreach and Contact Program of FICS would be based at an institution of higher education. Educational services for school-age children are diversified but overlapping on most campuses. The separate entities are: (1) special education, (2) early childhood, (3) family relations, (4) speech and hearing, (5) reading, (6) school psychological services, (7) guidance and counseling services, and (8) educational administration.

Based on identified needs, support from these areas would be provided on a contractual basis. Two faculty members from the College of Education

would be designated to coordinate the services provided by the Support System components. The schools involved in the implementation of FICS would serve as practicum and internship sites for selected graduate students.

Implementation

Thompson (1968, p. 68) states that too often home-school communication has been perceived as:

1. Teachers criticizing students and parents as not being cooperative when there are discipline problems or when assigned tasks are left undone.
2. Parental conflicts with the school or school conflicts with the home are frequently assessed as a lack of cooperation.
3. The cooperative parent is often identified as one who stays home, is sometimes seen, but never heard.
4. The cooperative principal and teacher make everybody happy.

Traditionally, many schools have viewed their function as assuming total responsibility for the educational growth of students and cooperation as a process, whereby, parents were minimally informed as to the educational growth being made by their children. However, any educator who has participated in innovation will readily recognize that it is one thing to construct theoretical models or "paper programs," but quite another to implement the theories. There are certain realities unique to any particular school setting, which the alert administrator will take into consideration as he/she begins a family involvement program. The FICS model is not presented as a panacea for all situations, but simply as a model subject to modification according to the needs of individual communities.

Therefore, four alternative procedures for implementation of a FICS program are suggested:

1. Slow Implementation - This approach is recommended when certain constraints exist that cause the principal to deem caution necessary where innovation is concerned. One or two components can be selected and implemented to test their contribution to the overall school program. This approach has been

used successfully in several school systems in Oklahoma by initiating Parent Rooms, Parent Study Groups, and Home Visitation-Communication Specialists. If the administrator is utilizing slow implementation, which reflects caution, certainly he would want to determine the level at which he is willing to involve parents in the educational program. Inservice workshops for parents and teachers are mandatory.

2. Total Implementation - In utilizing the "total implementation" approach, caution is recommended. To undertake a massive endeavor requires careful planning with and training of parents. Inservice arrangements need to be made with professionals from higher education. Six months to one year should be spent in preparatory activities prior to total implementation of FICS.

3. Parent-Teacher Organization - This procedure is recommended for schools that have an active Parent-Teacher Organization, and an administrator who is capable of delegating or sharing decision-making power. The PTO would assume major responsibility for implementation of the FICS program. This approach could make use of any one or all three of the other suggested approaches to implementation.

4. Selection - The FICS model will not, nor was intended, to fit the needs of all communities. Therefore, this suggested procedure is simply a process of selecting those components of FICS that meet immediate needs of the community and implementing them. Once again, inservice training for parents and teachers is an integral part of the successful implementation of FICS.

Many creative administrators, along with their faculties, have developed their own successful strategies for developing school-home-community programs. The model set forth here and suggested alternatives for implementation are not presented as necessarily the only or best. However, FICS is one model that has proved useful in:

1. Presenting a comprehensive systematic program for family involvement and communication in the school experience, and

2. Serving as a guide or catalyst to principals and faculties in either developing or upgrading existing family programs.

Summary

In the final analysis, implementation of the FICS model provides training and experiences for teachers, principals, parents and graduate students in involvement and communication skills. However, FICS is designed as an on-going program, with additional instruction and experiences conducted by those trained during the original period of operation.

If past parent programs have not been as successful as they might have been then it is time to look for alternative models for actively involving parents in the school experience of their young. The FICS model is one such alternative.

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